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PIONEERS OF LOS ANGELES

EX-MAYOR JOHN G. NICHOLS.

BY H. D. BARROWS.

(Read before the Pioneers, Feb. 1, 1898.)

John Gregg Nichols, who served several terms as Mayor of Los Angeles in the early fifties, was born in Canandaigua, Ontario county, New York, December 29, 1812. His father, Wm. Nichols, was a native of Edinboro, Scotland, who came to America with his parents when a child, settling in Middlebury, Vt., and his mother, whose maiden name was Fanning, was a native of Stonington, Ct.

The subject of this sketch went with his parents in the winter of 1827-8 to Fulton county, Ill., where he remained till he attained his majority. He served through the Blackhawk Indian war in 1832. In 1833 he went to the Galena lead mines, where he remained till 1842. In 1838 he was married to Florida Cox, by whom he had nine children, six of whom are still (1898) living, one of them, T. H. Nichols, being now Auditor of the city of Los Angeles.

In 1842 Mr. Nichols moved with his family to Jackson Co., Iowa. He served as Sheriff of that county two terms. In May, 1849, with his family he started for California, across the plains via Great Salt Lake and the Cajon Pass, arriving where the town of San Bernardino now is Dec. 31, 1849.

In crossing the plains Mr. Nichols commanded a large train of about 100 wagons, which he brought into the Great Salt Lake Valley in good shape about the first of September. There the train disbanded, many of the members having in view the late terrible experiences of the Donner party, feared to proceed on to California by the northern route.

Having consulted with some mountaineers and with returned Mormons as to the feasibility of the southern route, it was thought that a train could be taken through to Los Angeles at that time of year at far less risk than by the northern route. Accordingly a train of nearly a hundred wagons was made up, and under the leadership of Mr. Nichols, set out for that place. After traveling some

300 miles, two mule (pack) trains overtook and passed them, and their animals ate up the grass along the line. The animals of Mr. Nichols commenced dying for want of forage; most of the wagons were stranded along the route, and many of the people were compelled to come into California on foot, or on pack animals.

It had been thought that the train, with no bad luck, could come through from Salt Lake in twenty-five days; instead, the main body was on the road three months, and some members of the party, falling behind, were still longer in reaching their destination.

The valley of San Bernardino at the time of Mr. Nichols' arrival was occupied mainly by the Lugos as a stock ranch. Mr. Nichols remained there a couple of months on account of illness in his family, he meanwhile making several trips to Los Angeles, where he made the acquaintance of the American residents, Stearns, John Temple, Alexander and Mellus, Wilson and Packard, etc., his intention being to go on to San Francisco as soon as his family had regained their health. But on consulting with the above-named Americans, they advised him to settle in Los Angeles and aid them in establishing the American régime here; and he finally concluded to do so. Although California had come under American rule in 1846, local government here as elsewhere throughout the Territory, was carried on largely according to Mexican laws and customs, as they had existed before the change.

A city election was held in May, 1850, the first under the Constitution of 1849, and Mr. Nichols was elected Recorder and Hodges as Mayor, as also was a Common Council of five members, consisting of John Temple, Manuel Requena, Ygnacio del Valle, Julian Chaves and B. D. Wilson. The office of Recorder then corresponded nearly to that of Police Judge; it had jurisdiction in criminal but not in civil cases. The Legislature of '50-'51 merged the offices of Mayor and Recorder, making the former ex-officio Police Judge, as well as Mayor.

In May, '51, Mr. Nichols was elected Mayor, and he performed the duties of both offices. During the period of eleven years from 1851 to 1862 he was elected as Mayor three times. During this time also he was elected as a member of the City Council and of the School Board. He aided in starting the first American private school in 1850, on Los Angeles street, which was taught by Dr.

Weeks, a Congregational minister, and his wife. Afterwards the public schools were organized, and Mr. Nichols and John O. Wheeler were elected trustees, and they built the first two two-story brick schoolhouses, the one long known as the Bath-street Schoolhouse, and the other, which stood on the site of the present Bryson Block, corner of Spring and Second streets, both of which for so many years were familiar landmarks, and centers of our city educational interests, but which have been since demolished.

Mr. Nichols says he built in 1854 the first brick dwelling house in Los Angeles, namely his two-story residence on the west side of Main street, next south of the present site of the Bullard Block. He says he paid the maker of the bricks. Capt. Jesse Hunter, \$30 per thousand for them. Capt. Hunter built another brick house, which is still standing, adjoining the residence of the late Gov. Downey. Capt. Hunter's brick kiln was somewhere in the rear of the present Potomac Block, near the foot of the hills.

Mr. Nichols, during his incumbency as Mayor, inaugurated the plan of granting what were known as "donation lots" to actual settlers on the Pueblo vacant lands. It was on his official recommendation that the Common Council authorized Maj. Henry Hancock to subdivide these lands outside of Ord's Survey, into 35-acre lots; and that in order to secure the actual settlement and improvement of these unoccupied city lands, they should be donated to any person who would go upon them and make improvements to the extent of two hundred dollars.

While he was Mayor, Mr. Nichols strongly (though unsuccessfully) urged the Council to adopt the scheme of bringing the water from up the river to the top of Fort Hill to a reservoir for the supply of the city for domestic use and the extinguishment of fires by gravity, etc. Afterward a company, known as the Canal and Reservoir Company, took up the idea, and, going well up the river, brought the water over the hills to reservoirs within the city for irrigation.

After 1862 Mr. Nichols turned his attention to farming and to mining, etc.

A son of Mr. Nichols, John Gregg, Jr., was the first American child born in Los Angeles, i.e., whose parents were both Americans. The date of this youngster's birth was April 24, 1851.

Mr. Nichols remembered well a striking saying of Wm. H. Sew-

ard, the great Secretary, which he made when he visited Los Angeles soon after the close of the war, and which he has never seen published. It was uttered at a dinner tendered to Mr. Seward at the Bella Union Hotel, then the leading inn of Los Angeles, but which is now known as the St. Charles. After he had eulogized California, and especially Southern California, very highly, saying it had a bright future, etc., some one observed "but we very much
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need a railroad." Mr. Seward replied: "Be patient, you will soon have four railroads, one by the southern route, one by the 35th parallel, one by the central route and one by the northern route."

As Mr. Nichols said: "How literally this prophecy has come true."

During the last few years Mr. Nichols has resided with his son in this city, enjoying, notwithstanding his great age, fair health and a clear intellect, almost to the last. He died January 22, 1898, at the age of 85 years. Mrs. Nichols died May 31, 1878.

STEPHEN C. FOSTER,

BY H. D. BARROWS.

(Read April 4, 1898.)

Away back in December, 1863, Mr. Foster, at my request, gave me a brief sketch, both of his own life and of his brother-in-law by marriage, Col. Isaac Williams of El Rancho del Chino. And again in November, 1896, he gave me fuller details relating to himself, together with some account of the early Alcaldes and Mayors of Los Angeles who preceded him and who succeeded him as the chief executive officers of our city during that period.

I hope to be able to give some account of these latter officials as recounted by Mr. Foster, in a future paper. Mr. Foster had a wonderfully retentive memory, of the minutest details of life in California 50 years ago. More than that, being an educated man, and having an eye for the picturesque, his description of events and persons, and of manners and customs of the pastoral period of California history possesses a peculiar charm. And above all, the kindly, sympathetic spirit towards the Spanish-speaking Californians and others of the olden times which pervaded all that he wrote or said concerning them, is worthy of unreserved commenda-